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ABSTRACT

Ten management problems for chairs of small departments in small colleges are discussed, along with problem-solving strategies for these administrators. Serious disagreements within a small and intimate department may create a country club culture in which differences are smoothed over and the personal idiosyncrasies of individual members are accommodated in some way. The rotation of chairpersons at 2- or 3-year intervals and the expectation that the leader will soon be returned to the ranks combine with the country club atmosphere to stifle creative leadership. Additional problems are: town hall decision-making; the intrusion of faculty from other disciplines into departmental faculty evaluations and curriculum development; lack of support staff and usually a limited database of institutional research; intense pressures to please students in order to maintain high course enrollments; the informality of most decision-making processes; the difficulty of building relatively standard curricula around the skills of a small number of faculty; helping faculty to keep up to date in a wide range of subjects; and aiding faculty in reaching their professional development goals and in producing salable vitas. (SW)

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CHAIRING A SMALL DEPARTMENT

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Small departments present a set of management problems for chairs that are distinctly different from those encountered by chairs of large departments. Ten of these management problems are identified in the paper, and chairs of small departments are provided with a set of recommended strategies for dealing with these problems.

The size and institutional setting of small departments lead to a number of management problems that are analytically distinct from the problems faced by department chairs in large undergraduate colleges and universities. Allan Tucker defined a small department as one that has up to nine full-time faculty members (including the chair) in his book Chairing the Academic Department: Leadership among Peers. Tucker identified a number of problems common in small departments, including (1) country club accommodation, (2) rotating chairpersons, and (3) town hall decision-making. To these, we add seven additional management problems which plague the chairs of small departments. These problems are (4) the intrusion of faculty from other disciplines into departmental faculty evaluations and curriculum development, (5) lack of support staff and usually a limited data base of institutional research, (6) intense pressures to please students in order to maintain high course enrollment in institutions where other measures of faculty productivity are minimized, (7) the informality of most decision-making processes, which increases the importance of impression management, (8) the difficulty of building relatively standard curricula around the skills of a small number of faculty, (9) helping faculty to keep up to date in a wide range of subjects, and (10) aiding faculty in reaching their professional development goals and in producing salable vitas. These problems are discussed in the following sections, within which department chairs are provided with a number of recommended strategies that they can use in dealing with the problem.

Country Club Accommodation

Country club accommodation tends to occur in small departments because its members engage in continuous interaction over an extended period of time in pursuit of common goals. The emotional and social consequences of serious disagreements within a small and intimate work group are so great that many departments develop a country club culture in which differences are smoothed over and the personal idiosyncrasies of individual members are accommodated in one way or another. Tucker (1981) describes a country club department as one that:

often takes on the relaxed air of a country club as it goes about its business. Since all its members know each other, they usually share a unity of purpose and a sense of group cooperation seldom found in any other kind of department. Of course, there may be personality

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clashes or grave philosophical differences among members but the strife is genteel, as it is in a country club. (p. 30)

Life in a country club department is usually pleasant, but not always intellectually stimulating. Members rarely challenge each other, so positions are not examined as carefully as they might be. The department drifts toward a curriculum that suits its members as they are and away from an accurate representation of the major thrusts of the discipline. There is a certain lack of professionalism in this. In the long run, the country club department runs the risk of losing its strongest students and suffering diminished status in the eyes of administrators and faculty in other departments.

The chair who wants to avoid country clubism is faced with a task of great subtlety. One way to attack the problem without alienating the other members of the department is to inch the department closer to its national disciplinary organization, which usually publishes materials outlining appropriate coverage for an undergraduate curriculum, and may also be able to recommend curriculum consultants who could visit with the department. Another strategy is to establish a comparison group of institutions with similar characteristics and study their recommendations so that the chair can avoid becoming the focus of conflict by introducing external forces which can be used to stimulate department members to be more rigorous in their professionalism. The inescapable conclusion is that professors in small departments must subordinate their personal preferences to disciplinary requirements more, not less, than professors in large departments if departmental offerings are to mirror standards for quality and distribution of course content that are current in the discipline.

Rotating Chairpersons

Tucker's (1981) observation that chairpersons in small departments often rotate contrasts with the research of Pfeffer and Moore (1980), who found that the positive correlation between department size and length of the chair's tenure which existed between 1957 and 1966 became a negative correlation in the following decade for the 40 departments they studied. Between 1967 and 1976, the smaller the size of the department, the longer the term of the chair's tenure ($r = -.23$, p less than .10). We believe that Tucker is correct for small departments in small colleges. Pfeffer and Moore compared departments of various sizes in two large universities. The small department in a large university is in a very different situation from the small department in a college where all the other departments are also small, and where resources are usually quite limited for successful as well as unsuccessful departments. We will confine our comments to the small college setting, since that is the focus of this paper.

Rotating chairpersons at two or three year intervals goes hand in hand with country clubism in small departments. Short tenure and the expectation that the leader will soon be returned to the ranks of the led combine with the country club atmosphere to stifle creative

leadership behavior. Does this mean that chairpersons shouldn't rotate? We think not. In most departments, there is enough administrative talent to support a rotating chair. If the chair's job description were properly constituted, then the amount of work involved would keep most unqualified or lazy faculty from being willing to take the job. The outline of the duties to be added to traditional chairpersons' tasks will emerge from the sections that follow, although we make no attempt to provide a comprehensive job description for chairs in this paper.

Town Hall Decision-Making

When the entire department decides everything as a committee of the whole, the chair becomes little more than a secretary. Some rotating chairpersons may not want to be more than secretaries in any case. Log rolling is rife in town hall decision-making. Tucker (1981) describes the system as follows.

Everyone defers to everyone else, and even the chairperson may follow the path of least resistance—spreading the resources evenly, giving each faculty member's courses and programs equal billing in the catalog and in the schedule of courses, promoting everyone's friend, tenuring all newcomers as soon as possible, and trying to give everyone the same salary (prorated, of course). (p. 30)

The consequences of town hall decision-making are the same as they are for country club accommodation. The abdication of leadership by the chair and, in a more refined sense, of professional responsibility by department faculty leads to the loss of the strongest students and to declining status for the department in the eyes of administrators and faculty in the college.

Collegiality is a desirable ingredient in the academic mix. We do not wish to suggest that chairs should use strong-arm tactics to bring their departments into line. Our preference is to preserve collegiality and to use it as a force to support the position of the chair rather than to undermine it. The chair and key department faculty members must work together to convince the other faculty members in the department that town hall decision-making and a weak chair are not in the best interest of the department or its students. Tucker (1981) suspects that the chairs of small departments need to be even more strong-willed than the chairs of larger units. They must somehow combine this strength of resolve with a diplomacy that is both graceful and patient. Stated most simply, their task is to convince faculty members to make personal and professional sacrifices for the sake of departmental progress.

The Intrusion of Faculty from Other Disciplines

Small departments do not have the organizational influence or the faculty size to exclude non-disciplinary faculty from internal departmental matters. This is true for all departments to a limited

extent, such as when curricular changes must be approved by the campus-wide faculty senate and the board of trustees before they can be entered in the catalog and offered to students. Small departments typically are subjected to intrusions that go beyond these curricular legislative activities. Hiring, tenure and promotion decisions in large departments are made by committees composed exclusively of department members. The recommendations then go to the chair, the dean, the president, and eventually the board of trustees. Small departments have difficulty controlling personnel decisions when the majority of the members of a hiring, promotion or tenure committee are from outside the discipline. Even worse, the committee's recommendations probably go directly to the dean, excluding the chair from participation in the decisions except perhaps as a voting member of the committee. Chairs whose formal participation in personnel decisions are curtailed may also find that their informal influence with the dean on personnel matters is painfully limited.

Department chairs in these settings may be able to improve their positions if they develop coalitions with other chairs to insist that departments and their chairs play a more significant role in personnel decisions. For example, it could be agreed that no faculty member from outside the department will be added to a personnel committee until all tenured department faculty have been invited to sit on the committee. Another useful proposal would be that the department chair must also be chair of all personnel committees evaluating department members. A final suggestion is that the committee's decision be routed to the chair, who then has the option of forwarding it to the dean or holding it back, exercising a veto over the process. There are many other possibilities for institutional arrangements that preserve the prerogatives of the department as a professional association of disciplinary experts, depending on past practice and contemporary politics at each institution.

Limited Institutional Support Staff

The average small department receives little help from the centralized support service staff of the institution. Small departments usually reside in institutions that do not have a large library staff, a welldeveloped institutional research office, or other support services that might be called upon to help department chairs. It is possible to lobby for additional support staff in some institutions. Most will be unable to afford new support staff. The result is that department chairs must be their own audio-visual aids experts, public relations managers, editors, institutional data analysts, placement directors, librarians, equipment technicians, and sometimes even janitors.

Of course, no chair can possibly carry out all these tasks alone. Some of them must be delegated to the members of the department. Others will fall to the chair. The most important of the functions usually reserved for the chair are data analysis and public relations. The registrar's office will supply basic data on class enrollments and majors. Any records beyond this may have to be kept within the department. If chairs want to show the dean that their departments are

successful in placing graduates in good jobs, that faculty members are well respected in their fields and active in the local community, that graduates praise the education they received, or anything else of a positive nature, they will have to do their own studies and collect their own data.

Having collected the data, chairs shift gears and become public relations officers. Public relations isn't limited to typing up releases and sending them to the local newspaper. A more important part of the public relations function consists of making sure that important decision-makers within the university community are kept informed about all the good things that are going on within the department. Other communications will be directed toward students or faculty outside the department. These public relations activities are part of the general impression management responsibility of the chair, a subject that is discussed later in this paper.

Pressure to Please Students

Educating students and pleasing students overlap, but they are not the same thing. Small departments are commonly under intense pressure to please students, sometimes at the expense of the quality of educational practices.

Students may pressure a responsible teacher into lowering the quality of a course by refusing to enroll. Professors who can not attract a reasonable enrollment in their courses are an unwanted luxury at liberal arts colleges in these times of financial stress. Students may also put psychological pressure on their professors while enrolled in an attempt to lower standards and ease the amount of work required for a given grade. (Bowker, 1980, p. 82)

When departments are not rated by other criteria, student enrollment (construed as a rough index of the quality of teaching) can become a terrible taskmaster. Bowker and Lynch (1984) found that the importance of research grants and publications in evaluating program quality rose directly with a number of different measures of institutional size. In contrast, teaching quality and student enrollment were more important in the smaller institutions than the larger institutions. This increases the pressure on departments in these institutions to keep students happy (particularly as reflected on student-teacher evaluation forms) and to maximize course enrollments.

Chairs in enrollment-sensitive academic environments can work with faculty members to help them "teach to" the specific dimensions of faculty performance that are emphasized on student rating forms. Chairs can also ensure that their expectations for student performance are not unrealistically high. At the same time, faculty members need support when they face student pressure to lower standards inappropriately. The problem becomes acute for new faculty members who have not yet had a chance to adjust their standards to the local student body, and whose tentativeness in class encourages students to

define them as easy marks for pressures to lower standards and give out easy grades.

Informality in Decision-Making

Many small four-year colleges have neither the classroom observations of community colleges nor the rigorous evaluation of publications that is found in research universities. Opinions are formed about intellectual competence, classroom performance, and other dimensions of faculty quality in the absence of any data beyond personal impressions and possibly student evaluation forms. With little objective information at their fingertips, it is understandable that personal bias will increase in importance in the thinking of administrators and college-wide faculty committees. Those decision-makers will carry out their responsibilities based on their images of professors, instead of a reasonably objective set of data about the professors' professional competencies. These images are:

based on informal social contacts at parties, the faculty lounge, and talks at the coffee machine, plus formal contacts in committee meetings, the few comments made in passing by students during advising sessions, and occasional public presentations. When information is of this quality, it is possible for severe errors to occasionally be recorded as fact. (Bowker, 1980, p. 79)

The wise chair copes with these constraints by adding another item to his or her job description, that of director of impression management. The facts do not speak for themselves in small departments and on small campuses. Impressions and images dominate resource allocation and personnel decisions. It is important to have the department represented on as many prestigious committees as possible. Public relations within the institution are critical to successful impression management. Another important principle is to influence department members to be conscious of their public relations responsibilities while on as well as off campus. When a member of the faculty undermines a departmental colleague with someone outside the department, it hurts the entire department as it reinforces a negative rather than a positive image. This approach also applies to personnel decisions, in which a public relations effort of several years duration may make the difference in securing tenure for a worthy and valued member of the department.

Building A Quality Curriculum with a Small Faculty

The average small four-year college in the sample studied by Bradshaw and McPherron (1980) employed 2.6 full-time and 2.1 part-time faculty who taught 16.1 different courses and 21.8 separate sections in the sociology department. The average sociology faculty member had 4.9 preparations per year and 89.5 students per semester. Other small departments will vary somewhat from these statistics, but the general pattern will no doubt be the same. Each faculty member teaches many different preparations per year, with few multiple sections to moderate the load. The positive side of these statistics is that the sections are smaller than sections in larger colleges and universities.

The pressure to attract as many new students as possible and the desire to expose department majors to all the courses they will need to be competitive in the job market are among the reasons small departments try to offer as many different courses as they can. Approximately five preparations per faculty member per year is not the end of the story, for many advanced courses are only offered every other year. The typical small college teacher may teach seven or more different courses over a two year period. On paper, the small department may appear to offer a full range of courses. Can it do this and still maintain high quality in teaching?

Helping Faculty Keep Up

Jacks and Weiner (1978) found that staying vital as a professional was the main problem cited by the small college professors they surveyed. No wonder, if they were trying to keep up in half-a-dozen specialties at once. It is probable that the college library doesn't even have two specialized journals for each of the advanced undergraduate courses a professor teaches during a curriculum cycle of four semesters, and it is unlikely that they have more than a handful of up-to-date specialized books on some of the subjects included in these advanced courses. Professors who want to stay current in a number of advanced fields at once have more than a time problem. They have a financial problem because the only ways they can have access to the publications they need to keep up are to regularly travel to major university libraries or to purchase the specialized books and journals themselves.

We believe that good teaching includes both the communication of the best knowledge available and training in how to use that knowledge, i.e. how to think. The most useful knowledge in most disciplines is theoretical rather than empirical, and is not limited to the latest reported research and criticism. Most good teaching surely is based on a comparison of contemporary findings with existing or classical knowledge in the field. Faculty who fail to keep up in the subjects they teach can not possibly provide a college quality education to their students.

Chairs have a responsibility to enhance the faculty's ability to keep current in their fields by attracting and distributing institutional resources for college library acquisitions, departmental libraries, faculty travel to research libraries and to take refresher courses, and workload reductions for faculty who are preparing new courses. An aggressive chair can negotiate with library administrators to increase the department's budget for the acquisition of books and to gradually increase the number of specialized journals in the field over a number of years. It may also be possible to use the department's operational funds to purchase a few journals for a small departmental library. Where college funds are unavailable for this purpose, creative chairs may be able to convince department faculty to pool their funds and subscribe to a number of journals jointly that they could not afford to receive as individuals, thus creating a departmental library out of private funds.

Orchestrating Faculty Development

We know that the pressures of academic life have been increasing in recent years (Austin and Gamson, 1983) and that faculty burnout is becoming common in academia (Meléndez and de Guzmán, 1983). The sources of the increasing pressures are generally beyond the control of department chairs. Burnout, however, is not the invariable consequence of these pressures. One mediating influence on the translation of pressure and stress into burnout is an active program of support for faculty development. The final addition that we will make in this paper to the job description of the chair is responsibility for the management of faculty development. Chairs do not necessarily have to write faculty development contracts with department members. A more informal approach is sufficient in most settings. The chair has the responsibility of acquiring resources for faculty development from the dean by making convincing cases for faculty development needs. The excitement of attending a major professional meeting, taking a brief refresher course, or receiving support to visit similar programs on other campuses, a major research library, or a business environment in which disciplinary perspectives are being used in an innovative setting will carry most faculty past the blues for a semester or two.

Deans often have much more money available for faculty development than chairs think possible. Many deans do not adequately publicize the possibilities for faculty professional development that they have in their budgets, preferring to wait until specific proposals are received. While we deplore this approach to faculty development, we can at least inform chairs of the practice. Deans have been exhorted to improve their behavior in support of faculty development in an earlier publication (Bowker, 1981). The way for a chair to find out whether the dean is hiding faculty development funds is to prepare a written proposal and make an appointment to deliver and discuss it in person. Although most deans respond well to piecemeal requests for individual projects, chairs can increase their success in the acquisition of resources by developing integrated long-range plans for department needs, backed by comparative data on what is happening at other colleges, current standards in the discipline, and so forth.

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that small departments and small colleges have management problems that are substantially different from the management problems that are commonly found in larger organizational settings. Ten of these problems have been identified and briefly discussed. We have also offered suggestions as to appropriate strategies department chairs might wish to use in dealing with these problems.

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